

**Remarks of Peter McWalters
To a Joint Session of the General Assembly**

**“PREPARING FOR OUR CHILDREN’S CENTURY - RESULTS MATTER”
The State of Education in Rhode Island
House Chamber -- April 13, 1999**

Mr. Speaker. Majority Leader Kelly. Governor Almond. Lieutenant Governor Fogarty. Members of the General Assembly. Distinguished educators. Guests. Parents. Teachers. Students...

I am pleased to report to you tonight that the state of education in Rhode Island has been profoundly and forever changed for the better because you have had the collective foresight and the political will to change it.

At every level, there is an emerging appreciation of the importance of *truly* preparing our students for our future. From the school house to the state house, we are committed to progress and, more than ever, we know that *results matter*.

There has been a sea-change in our community. Teachers, parents, and administrators understand that the stakes are high. They desperately want their students to perform. Students want schools that work for them. Political and community leaders want the best education that they can afford. The educational environment in Rhode Island, in every community, has tremendous potential, and educators are hungry for the resources they need to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In the last few years we have created a community of interest—it includes the Governor, the General Assembly, the Board of Regents, school committee members, teachers, administrators, parents and students alike. Through this community we have raised expectations and identified standards of student achievement. We have made education a priority in Rhode Island, and we have achieved national recognition for our efforts.

We are on track—and much of our progress is due to state level leadership—

This leadership is critical as we approach the next millennium.

Think of it—we are at the *edge* of a *century*.

From this vantage point the next millennium is in clear view.

The 21st century holds enormous potential and extraordinary challenges. We must accept the responsibility that the decisions we make now will position our children and determine their fate and our success in the year 2000 and beyond.

I don't want to spend too much time looking back—it's time to plan for the future. Still, history holds valuable lessons.

In Rhode Island's history, the turn of the century has meant *bold* state level action in the area of education.

200 years ago the General Assembly passed a law calling for the establishment of free public schools. A century later, the debate turned from one of *access* to schools to one focused on the *quality* of the schooling. The legislature enacted legislation to "secure uniform high standards in the public schools."

These legislative acts were turning points.

Here we are, one hundred years later, faced with decisions that will chart our course for the next century. Like your colleagues from a century past, your debate must focus on ensuring access to high quality educational opportunities. A defining difference is that *our* commitment is to **all children. It is measured by leaving no child behind. This is our version of America's promise.**

Our children's century will require a new and different set of skills.

Our children's century will be a WWW.World century overflowing with unfiltered information accessed in mili-seconds, processed at the speed of light in graphic images and colorful displays, enticing the curious and luring the under-educated with glittery propaganda and false promise.

Education can and *must* be the great equalizer.

Globalization will require, more than ever, that students have a sound educational framework into which to fit the pieces of a vast and complex puzzle.

Our Comprehensive Education Strategy, Article 31 and all of the progress that we as an education community have made in the last few years position Rhode Island well to pioneer this next frontier.

To understand the resources needed to fulfill our commitment and achieve our goals — to be a state that ensures that schools have what they need to prepare generations of world class fourth graders -- I need to give you a sense of where we are today. . .

As I said, we are on track largely because we have built a community of interest beginning with the Board of Regents. The Regents have long been on the side of the angels, calling for the highest educational standards, the resources to support them, and for state aid that is adequate, fair and equitable so that we can reach our goals.

The charge has been led by a man who has become legendary in this state. You all know him. His name is Fred Lippitt, and I would be more than remiss if I did not recognize his extraordinary effort on the Regents for the last fifteen plus years. Fred has spent his life as a committed public servant, and, through his actions, deeds, words, and manner, defines the sensibility of an educator and the nobility of the ideal public servant.

We announced last month that Fred is stepping down. Please join me in thanking him for his dedication to education and his service to the people of Rhode Island.

While the Regents have often sparked the debate, the Governor and the legislature resolve it through public policy. You did this two years ago with landmark legislation—Article 31. And I must give credit where credit is due—our resolve would not have been possible legislatively were it not for the tenacious leadership of Representative Pires and Senator Lenihan and the hard work of their subcommittee chairs Representative Crowley and Senator Cicilline.

Now, let me tell you about some of the progress we've made on this shared agenda. . .

We have set the bar high and made accountability part of Rhode Island's education-ethic.

We have gathered data to inform our decision making, plan for improvement, and track student progress.

We have established networks of schools learning from each other—at the elementary level, at the middle level through the Rhode Island middle level educators network, and at the high school level through the Skills Commission and Breaking Ranks. These networks engage in serious and sustained efforts to retool their schools and school systems so that they are based on performance standards and demonstrated student proficiency.

We have our first two charter schools, we've secured a competitive national grant and there's legislation before you to expand on our success.

We've received national recognition from Education Week magazine, which has singled out Rhode Island for our School Accountability for Learning and Teaching process--SALT.

And I am pleased to report that, though it may be too early to call it a trend, we have seen positive signs of progress in our test results.

This past fall we released results from the second round of our performance based tests in math and English language arts. These tests measure how well students apply their knowledge and skills. They're designed to measure student performance in relation to state and national expectations. The tests also spotlight, for teachers, students, parents, and administrators what a student needs to know and be able to do.

The most notable gains were in grade 10 writing where 42 percent of the students met or exceeded the Regents standard of proficiency, compared with 33 percent doing this in 1997.

In math, sixty-seven percent of the 10th graders met or exceeded the standard in traditional basic math skills, an increase over 1997.

The basics are something we have focused on, but now, given the challenges of the next century, we are asking schools to broaden this foundation by teaching students the new basics, including more complex skills required to think through and solve problems.

While we have made progress since 1997, we do not yet do well in these more advanced areas.

This is confirmed by results from tests we gave for the first time in 1998. The English language arts tests that 4th graders took last spring illustrate that students statewide do well in basic reading comprehension. Once asked to analyze and interpret what they've read, however, these tests reveal that even our best districts have a long way to go to meet the standards.

You need to know that this gap between where students are and where they need to be gets larger the poorer the community. And, recent reports have demonstrated this.

We are leaving some children behind.

From Kids Count we know that the percentage of children from poor families is increasing.

From the SALT survey we know that far too many children are spending too much time unsupervised after school, including a significant number of elementary age children.

From RIPEC we know that the two-thirds of our state's poor children live in the five core cities.

We're leaving some children behind.

In fact, one fifth of our children drop out of school.

We're leaving some children behind. Our challenge is to leave no child behind.

It is important to understand that we have set the bar high. And it must remain high if our students are to be prepared to compete in the complex world of the next century.

Setting high standards is not only right. It is essential, even if it means that closing the gaps and reaching our goals will take more time and resources for some children and communities. But, I can assure you, if we meet the standards we have set for all our children, the return on our investment will more than pay for itself.

We know that test results matter. They are a barometer of how a school is performing. We learn even more about a school and its community when we view these results in the context of other valuable information such as teacher practices, level of family involvement, and spending patterns.

Because we know that "Information Works," we have, once again worked with the University of Rhode Island to collect a variety of data and to compile it by school and district.

Next month, we will release the second edition of "Information Works" so that the reports can be used to engage communities in dialogues for progress. In fact, last year, armed with this data, more than two-thirds of our schools held school report nights, and this year I expect every school to hold a report night. I hope that every parent and teacher, every student and administrator, and every state and local official will attend.

Schools also use this information to set the improvement targets that you have called for in law, and to develop plans of action to reach their goals. For the first time, every school in Rhode Island has set student performance targets publicly. The challenge now rests in supporting the hard work required to meet them.

Our approach to accountability focuses on identifying the support each school needs. It is based on more than test scores. It is based on professional judgement, on real-life observation, on participation and hands-on evaluations. It is a human as well as a statistical effort, and it has been so recognized.

Teams of educators, parents, and administrators have visited schools, spending a week with teachers and following students, looking at classrooms, seeing for themselves the process, the problems, and the potential for improvement.

So far we have completed 14 of 20 visits scheduled for this year. The Governor's budget request would support 40 visits next year. We plan on doing 60 visits each year thereafter, allowing a statewide review cycle for all schools over a 5 year period.

But support alone may sometimes not be enough for a school to meet its goals. That is why we are taking seriously the authority you delegated to the Regents to move progressively from support to intervention when and where it is necessary.

To prepare every child to compete and succeed -- at every level -- in every district -- we need the dogged determination to stay the course, to confront the tension between the state's interest in results and local capacity and authority, and to make the necessary changes -- whatever it takes.

And let me tell you--it will take a focus on the early grades. It will take doing away with residency requirements for teachers. It will take new teacher testing. It will take a longer school year to support professional development. It will take a Department better positioned to support all districts and schools. It will take continuing to target resources based on a community's ability to pay and student needs. It will take rethinking the tax policies that support education,

including a mechanism to deal with our aging school buildings. It will take forging labor-management contracts that put students first. It will take shared responsibility for results at the community level.

That is--we need the resources and the resolve--as the terrain will only get more difficult the closer we get to our mark.

I ask for your commitment and your support tonight.

Education *is* the great equalizer. If we really want the world class fourth graders we've been talking about, we can't wait until kindergarten to level the playing field.

In fact, the Children's Cabinet has acknowledged this and set the goal that all children will enter school ready to learn. We have made progress in this area—and I must recognize Governor Almond for his leadership and his commitment to Starting Right, the linchpin of Rhode Island's quality early care and education system.

Let me also acknowledge Senator Izzo and Representative Benoit for their continuing leadership in the creation of this program, and for their advocacy to improve the health and welfare of children in Rhode Island.

This commitment needs to continue once children enter the classroom. Governor Almond acknowledged this with his proposed incentives to create all day kindergartens, and when he joined with me to form the Reading Excellence Panel to focus on policy development and on teaching reading in the early grades. I urge that you continue your non-partisan approach to education and support these investments—they're essential steps for progress.

We know that literacy and numeracy are fundamental – they are prerequisites to learning. The next century will require more. We will have to teach our children to make sound decisions—to read critically, work collaboratively and think globally.

Children, teachers, parents -- all of us, everyday -- are being bombarded with information from around the world, filtering into our living rooms and filling our lives. Do we understand it? Will our children have the basic background knowledge to evaluate it? How do we teach, in an information age, that information alone, unedited and unfiltered, can be a vast and confusing puzzle if we do not have a fundamental framework of knowledge into which we can fit the pieces? And how will we prevent thousands of children from being left behind?

As rapidly as we find answers, the pace of change creates more questions.

How do we keep up and how do we prepare our children for a cyber-world in which all reality seems virtual?

In that world, there will be no political, economic, or geographic boundaries to learning. Nations can no longer keep information in, nor can they keep it out. At the click of a mouse, the touch of a key, children are exposed to diverse cultures and ideas, religions and values, customs and habits, all of which may be beyond their ability to appreciate, to analyze and to evaluate if they are not culturally, socially, and politically literate.

And it is not only children. All of us may surf the internet and be confronted with ideas that we do not understand.

Instant access to information *is* the future. But it is incumbent on us to understand the implications, to prepare our children, to harness the power of information and make very very certain that every child in Rhode Island has a top quality, first-class education that gives them the wisdom to understand the dynamics of the world in which they live, and the ability to critically analyze the information they receive. And we must instill the values and the knowledge they will need to use that information well.

The best investment we can make to achieve that goal is in our teachers. It is the teacher who is on the front-line of the battle for the minds of our children, and whatever they need to wage that battle successfully, they deserve.

We must retool and restructure as keenly and with as much focus as the private sector to give our teachers what they need to succeed. That means working with our colleges and universities to rethink teacher preparation programs *before* they enter the classroom, assuring mentoring programs *as* they enter the classroom, and providing on-going collegial professional development programs for as long as they are in the classroom.

Our budget request before you emphasizes these strategies to enhance teacher quality. Please consider them, and fund them.

Tonight we have a number of award winning educators with us. These fine teachers represent the thousands who dedicate themselves, day in and day out, to improving the lives of children. They include this year's Teacher of the Year, Barbara Ashby from the Providence Public Schools, former Teachers of the Year, Milken Award Winners, Presidential Award Winners in Mathematics and Science, Christa McAuliffe Fellows and National Board Certified teachers. I ask these distinguished educators, who are seated up in the gallery, to please stand and be recognized.

And let me say to every teacher in this chamber, and to teachers statewide—and particularly to Representative Steve Anderson, an effective advocate for professional development and teacher recognition—thank you.

No matter how well prepared our teachers may be, there is, of course, no more important person in a child's education than a parent. Let us not overlook the importance of parent partnerships in the educational process. Research tells us—and we know--that strengthening the parent's role in their child's learning is critical to student success. In the next year, we must re-dedicate ourselves to strengthening that partnership in every way possible.

We have done this with our Child Opportunity Zones, which operate in 13 school districts, and provide critical points of access and support to families.

And tonight, we have with us examples of schools that are being deliberate in their efforts to engage parents.

The Charles Fortes school in Providence is in the early stages of using laptops to connect parents to their children's learning.

The Stadium School in Cranston responded to last year's SALT survey of parents and improved the flow of communication. And guess what—this year's survey shows that parents feel better equipped to help their children learn.

Please join me in recognizing Ed Mara, the principal of Stadium School, and Nancy Owen from the Fortes school, and the teachers, parents and students who have joined us to celebrate their work.

Any state that's making real progress on this agenda also has a strong partnership with the business community. We have the beginnings of this through our cooperative work with the Human Resource Investment Council's School to Career effort. But we will need far greater involvement if we are to succeed. The recent formation of the Business Education Roundtable is a step in the right direction, and we welcome it.

If we believe in education, if we believe in high standards, if we believe in fairness, if we believe that education is the great equalizer, then we must continue to invest and look for results.

Every community, from the suburbs to the inner city, requires resources to meet the standards we have set, but we must allocate those resources fairly.

Fairness means recognizing a community's ability to pay, its effort in support of its schools, and the needs of its children.

The reality is that we are often attempting to achieve equal results from totally disparate starting points, and it will cost more in an inner city school than in a suburban school.

Having said that, I know that tax dollars are limited, and the will of many communities to invest is, at best, equally limited. That is the political reality with which I know you must deal.

For the last few years there has been a conscious effort to drive new state dollars to the most needy districts and to targeted strategies, such as professional development. This is necessary and consistent with our policy agreement to level up, and we need to continue it. It is critical if we are to meet our promise to leave no child behind.

In the current environment, however—where schools are working hard to bring all students to high standards, and there are consequences if they don't get there—*all districts* need additional support. There is a real need to identify an equitable financing mechanism. This will require new tax policies. It's tough work—and I urge that you take it on. This may be the bold state level action we need to enter the millennium with strength. . .

Making schools accountable, establishing tough but necessary standards, providing every child with the basic educational skills they'll need in the global marketplace of the next century, must be our first priority, and we are moving steadily on that track.

Last year I urged you to stay the course. You have. Tonight I challenge you, and all of us, to do more.

As I stand here, I cannot help but note that the next time I speak to you on the state of education it will be the spring of a new century.

As a state, whose motto—"HOPE"-- is as resounding a pronouncement for the future of education as any, we have had the willingness and the wisdom to heed the call, and, luckily, we have had leaders at the state and local levels determined to act. That combination has meant success, and it has given many Rhode Islanders "HOPE."

As we leave the 20th century, we know that test scores are improving. The numbers and the trends are positive indicators. We are moving in the right direction. We are investing, though not enough. We have formed networks of support and partnerships for progress. We have received national recognition. We have a new educational-ethic in Rhode Island and we are committed to achieving our goals. But, in the face of globalized educational demands and advancements moving at the speed of light, we must lift our eyes from the tally sheets and look out, across the divide of the centuries, to the exciting, complex, and sometimes frightening world into which we will send our children. And we must ask ourselves: Are we doing all we can to prepare them?

Are we as a state doing all we can to fulfill the American promise?

The answers are not yet in the numbers. They are not yet in the test scores. They are not in the budget items or the bottom line. They are in our collective vision and depend upon our political will. The actions we take now, as the community of interest, will determine whether we truly leave no child behind. They will be the basis for the judgement our colleagues of the future will make about our wisdom, our foresight and our courage.

Let us leave here tonight committed to move beyond HOPE . . .to fulfilling our promise.

Thank you, and good night.